

Modern Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition do not engage with Parliament as much as their predecessors

By Democratic Audit UK

*Whoever the individual office holder, the Prime Minister is always the country's pre-eminent leader, with an infrastructure and responsibilities to the whole country. But they are also a member of the House of Commons, equal in voting rights and in their responsibilities to their constituents. **Michael Rush** shows that modern Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition tend to engage less in things like statements and voting than did their predecessors.*



Credit: 10 Downing Street, [CC BY ND 2.0](#)

'I am a child of the House of Commons' – Winston Churchill

'I have never pretended to be a House of Commons man' – Tony Blair

Party leaders are key figures in parliamentary government, most obviously the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, but also the leaders of smaller parties. As research by Democratic Audit [Director Patrick Dunleavy](#) and colleagues has shown, the parliamentary activity of Prime Ministers has declined since 1868. What of the Leaders of the Opposition and the leaders of other parties, which have become more significant in the 1970s and later? Examining their parliamentary participation between 1945 and 2010 reveals clear patterns. First, but not surprisingly, the parliamentary activity of Prime Ministers beyond that covered by Dunleavy et al has continued at much the same level as they found in the 1980s and early 1990s. Second, the participation of Leaders of the Opposition and leaders of the Liberals/Liberal Democrats (when in opposition) mirrors that of Prime Ministers – it is worth noting here that, despite the post-war decline in the number of Liberal MPs, Liberal Leaders were treated largely on a par with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Third, the activity of other party leaders follows a different pattern, in general showing much greater levels of participation.

The first of these patterns – the similar levels of participation by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberals/Liberal Democrats – suggests that it is the Prime Minister who sets the parameters.

Although Prime Ministers have long answered oral parliamentary Questions, Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) was institutionalised in 1961, with allotted days, time and duration and has become increasingly formulaic, with the Leader of the Opposition being allowed up to six Questions, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats two, but no quotas for the leaders of other parties, whose participation in PMQs is effectively in the hands of the Speaker.

Indeed, it can be argued that prime ministerial participation in general has been largely institutionalised in that, apart from PMQs, the Prime Minister speaks in only a few major debates (usually of his or her own choosing), makes regular statements in the Commons after EU other international summits, and votes in divisions, but does not (any more than any other minister) table or sign Early Day Motions (EDMs), and by so doing sets the pattern for the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats. As well as being actively involved in PMQs, Leaders of the Opposition and Leaders of the Liberal Democrats take part in the mini-debates that follow prime ministerial statements, but, like the Prime Minister, are not involved in committee activity. Only in participation in divisions is there a significant difference, with the Prime Minister voting far less often than either of the other two main party leaders, who have fewer demands on their time, although they do make limited use of parliamentary Questions for written answer.

All this contrasts markedly with the levels of participation shown by the leaders of other parties. Between 2005 and 2010, the Leaders of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) were much more active in debates, tabling Questions for written answer and EDMs, and voting in divisions. There were variations between them, the PC, the SNP and the SDLP Leaders being more the more active, but levels of participation also varied according to who was leading each party, with, for example, Alex Salmond being more active than John Swinney as SNP Leader. Why should this be so? It might seem more likely that the leaders of these parties, drawn as they are from parts of the UK with significant levels of devolution, would be less active than the leaders of the three main UK parties. It seems likely, however, that in order to get their voices heard they have to shout louder by being more active.

There is one further pattern, but it is an irregular one: prime ministerial participation in Parliament has always varied, but so too has that of Leaders of the Opposition and Leaders of the Liberals/Liberal Democrats. Attlee was famously terse, Churchill prolix, but their participation dwarfs that of more recent leaders, especially in debates. It may come as no surprise that Neil Kinnock was more prolific in debates than Margaret Thatcher and James Callaghan, who preceded him as Leader of the Opposition, and all those who succeeded him, though John Major runs him fairly close. As Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, was far more active during his first period of office (1964-70) than his second (1974-76), while Gordon Brown was more active than Tony Blair. Personality and attitudes towards role of party leader play their part, but they vary these longer-term patterns rather than contradict them.

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